



## *Electronic Medical Records: At Work In Louisiana*

### **Case Study: Riverside Family Medicine / Rural Health Clinic**

*By David L. Bowser, Corporate Communications Specialist*

**MAUREPAS, LA** – Can a medical office exist without any file cabinets filled with reams of paperwork containing patient information? That's the case at Riverside Family Medicine ([www.riversidefamilymedicine.com](http://www.riversidefamilymedicine.com)); a bustling rural health clinic located approximately 40 miles southeast of Baton Rouge.

"The only paper we keep pertains to our employees," says Marty Bennett, RN, who along with her husband/business partner Justin has operated the primary care clinic since November 2006. "Our patients still can't believe we don't give them a paper slip to fill a prescription," she says, referring to the electronic fax capability Riverside uses to immediately transmit information to local pharmacies.

Riverside is manned by four full-time employees and a medical director. For emergencies, Riverside works directly with the closest medical facility, St. Elizabeth Hospital, in Gonzales. "We are proud to be the first and only medical facility in this area serving a population within a 15-mile radius," said Justin Bennett, FNP. "Our goal is simple: to provide quality health care access to everyone."

The Bennett's first became aware of electronic medical records when Justin served in the U.S. Navy. "I saw how EMR replaced traditional medical charts. That sort of integration sets the standard for our clinic. EMR is particularly valuable in those moments when we have to stabilize patients. We have all of a patient's records on file; so we're able to give a printed copy to the emergency staff when they leave us."

The Bennett's researched several EMR vendors before opening their doors. "We had a limited budget but wanted an economical choice that met our needs," said Marty Bennett. "Our system (provided by [e-MDs](#) of Austin, Texas) does it all: patient data, private insurance billing, Medicare and Medicaid claims, scheduling, and prescriptions. You don't have a system if you don't have support. Not every vendor does this well. e-MD's [training](#) and [support](#) set them apart.

"There's another key reason why the Bennett's use EMR. "Our patients know their health and medical information are secure. We all know from the 2005 hurricanes how important records and record retention are. If another disaster happens, anyone's personal health information can be accessed immediately and forwarded to either the patient or another medical provider," Justin said.

Riverside is one shining example of how EMR is starting to spread across the state. In June 2008, Louisiana was one of 12 states selected to participate in a new federal incentive program designed to get private-practice doctor groups to use EMR. The initiative, announced by U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt, will make 100 small and medium-sized medical groups eligible for as much as \$295,000 in additional Medicare payments in the next five years if they adopt computerized systems that can connect to laboratories, hospitals, pharmacies and other doctors' offices.

Although hospitals and other large institutions have recently begun to trend away from paper records, Secretary Leavitt said private-practice physicians have been slow to accept EMR.

According to HHS, 85 percent of medical records are still generated on paper. Across Louisiana, newly elected Governor Bobby Jindal has advocated EMR adaptation by earmarking \$18.6-million in next year's state budget for a variety of health information technology initiatives. The line-item includes \$3.5-million specifically set aside for "financial incentives" for physicians to use recognized EMR software in their respective practices.

These national and state-wide developments mirror recent comments made to the Letter by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist. Sen. Frist told LAMMICO that "EMR is the future of American medicine." However, Sen. Frist believes all levels of government should initially invest in EMR so other components of the medical profession will follow. "Government needs to invest; to help align the incentives and get physician participation initially. Because doctors control 80 percent of health care in America, a system has to be created where physicians are rewarded for using EMR; be it a break in annual med mal premiums, other rate reductions or even the state increasing Medicare payments to providers who use and/or adopt this new technology."

Back in Maurepas, the Bennetts feel their initial investment in EMR is already paying dividends. Said Justin, "Our system was designed and works with the patient in mind, starting when they walk in the door. Our EMR system allows all of us to communicate: from the front office staff, to the nursing staff, and onto the pharmacy and the insurance companies."

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